

Rules, regulations and renovations

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This winter a homeowner in Roanoke's Old Southwest neighborhood has battled city hall for the right to install a historically incorrect but less costly shingle roof on his early 20th century metal-roofed home.

Aubrey Hicks lost before the city council and now has appealed to the courts for relief.

What some consider to be a heavy-handed, government-knows-best approach to enforcing Roanoke's H-2 historic district stands in sharp contrast to neighboring Salem's philosophy toward preserving its downtown district and homes, many of which predate Roanoke's.

Salem homeowners "have property rights and they should do what they want to with their property," Mayor Howard Packett said.

Salem doesn't have a defined historic zoning district, as Roanoke does, but the smaller city does make an effort to protect older homes and commercial structures along parts of Broad and Main streets, said Salem City Council member John Givens.

By and large, though, the city relies on the free market, and owners taking personal responsibility for their property, to protect its older structures.

A case in point: A couple's ongoing renovation of a prominent century-old mansion adjacent to the city's Lake Spring Park on West Main Street, located just before the older part of Salem gives way to the fast-food restaurants and strip shopping centers of West Salem.

Vincent and Ellen Lilley expect to spend about \$250,000 to \$300,000 to renovate and repair the home. The work includes clearing away brush that once obscured the house and replacing broken or cracked windows. Also, the house once again will have a wraparound porch and, if possible, its slate roofing will be replaced. All of its inner workings -- plumbing, electrical, heating and cooling systems -- are being updated.

The Lilleys bought the seven-bedroom, two-and-a-half bathroom, 4,500-square-foot house, the main part of which dates to 1903, in November from Thomas Cook. They paid \$395,000, according to city property records.

The renovations they've undertaken are voluntary.

If changes are made to a home, the work usually is reviewed by Salem's building inspector, Packett said. The building inspector doesn't control cosmetic changes, such as paint color, windows or roofing material, he said. The city has no architectural review board.

The issue of tightening regulations on personal property has come up, Packett said, but by doing so "you infringe on people's right to do what they want with their property, and that's what happening over in" Roanoke's Old Southwest.

More than 300 people packed a Roanoke meeting last month focused on the historic district regulations there. Residents said the rules designed to protect Old Southwest and a few other neighborhoods in Roanoke are burdensome, inconsistently enforced and may be pricing some homeowners out of their neighborhoods.

Salem officials usually don't intervene in what an owner does to his or her property "as long as folks are not living in squalor and breaking any types of codes," said Melinda Payne, Salem's economic development director. "You can't go and police people just by the looks of a building," she said.

In the past, Salem government has paid to relocate historically significant houses, Payne said. The city also implements adaptive reuse, or maintaining the original structure of a building for a purpose different from what was originally intended. One example is the Williams-Brown house, which houses the Salem Museum. Another is the Academy Street School, which has been converted into condominiums.

Salem, like other cities, also has homeowners' associations that are able to restrict what residents can do to property, Payne said.

The city, through the Salem Historical Society, has a voluntary register through which houses can be designated as "Salem Virginia Landmarks." The Salem Historical Society also encourages the city and homeowners to do whatever possible to save historic homes.

Protecting old houses could mean the difference between living in Salem, Va., or Anyplace, U.S.A., said Evie Slone, president of the Roanoke Valley Preservation Foundation. The foundation helps raise awareness of historically significant properties and has released a list of endangered properties for 10 years.

"When a lot of these places are being lost and there's no attention being called to them, people forget that they even existed," she said.

Even if there was only a historical designation of the houses and no tax benefits, creating a historic district is "worth doing to let people know that this is not just a random group of housing, that this is a community or neighborhood that stood the test of time," Slone said.

Having a historic district or listing a property on the state or national history registers encourages preservation of structures with historic significance "through recognition and building a sense of pride, and economically through tax credits," said Michael Pulice, an architectural historian for the Roanoke office of the Virginia Department of Historic Resources.

When government is considering exercising eminent domain to build a road or other public project, historic designations allow property protection from projects funded by state and federal dollars, he said. In those cases, the government is "compelled to consider alternatives to demolition and impact to historic properties," he said. That's what happened in Southeast Roanoke's Belmont neighborhood, when opponents to a downtown route for the proposed Interstate 73 won a national historic designation there in 2002. That designation effectively removed that route from consideration.

However, listing a house on a historic register is recognition, not preservation, said Bob Richert, who sits on Roanoke's Architectural Review Board. Richert and his wife, Joel, led the push to have Old Southwest designated a historic district nearly 20 years ago.

One advantage for Salem is that its residents have pride "on steroids," Bob Richert said.

Salem homeowners, like the Lilleys, tend to take care of their property once it's purchased, Packett said.

The Lilleys plan to restore the house to a state as close to the original as possible. They're also seeking anyone who may have old photos of the house or may remember details such as its original color.

Ellen Lilley said she also plans to have an open house, so Salem residents can tour the home at 715 W. Main St. before the family moves in. She is considering allowing community groups to meet at the house.

She hopes to have everything finished by spring